

Grade 7 - Informational

A Revolution in Communication

In the mid-19th century, the time it took to send a message depended on the speed of horses or ships. It could take 45 days to carry a message from San Francisco to New York by ship. A message traveling overland from St. Louis, Missouri, to San Francisco, California, could take three weeks. A faster way to communicate was needed.

Morse Code

In 1836, Samuel F. B. Morse invented a way to transmit words over long distances with the telegraph. The telegraph used a code named after its inventor. Morse code is a system of dots and dashes that represent a letter of the alphabet or a number.

In the early 1840s, Morse received money from the U.S. Congress. The money was used to string a telegraph line between Washington, D.C., and Baltimore, Maryland. The first message was officially sent across this line in 1844. By the end of the 1850s, many major cities along the East Coast were connected by telegraph lines.

The Pony Express

Telegraph lines did not stretch from the East Coast to the West Coast. A different way of delivering messages across the western part of the nation was needed. Pony Express riders were the solution.

The Pony Express riders traveled day and night over rugged land, deserts, and mountain passes to deliver mail. The riders traveled between 75 to 100 miles daily, changing horses every 10 to 15 miles. It still took several days for a message to reach its destination.

An Idea

In 1860, Congress awarded Western Union Telegraph a contract to build and maintain a telegraph line, which would complete the last link between the East Coast and West Coast. By completing the link, the country would have a transcontinental telegraph line.

Two teams of builders were employed to work on the project. The Pacific Telegraph Company would build the line from present-day Omaha, Nebraska, westward to present-day Salt Lake City, Utah. The Overland Telegraph Company would build from Carson City eastward to Salt Lake City.

Construction Challenges

In the summer of 1861, construction of the transcontinental telegraph line began.

Many obstacles were faced during the construction. Equipment such as huge coils of copper wire had to be shipped by sea to San Francisco, California. Next, horse-drawn wagons carried these same supplies eastward across the rugged peaks of the Sierra Nevada range to the construction site. Lumber needed for telegraph poles was scarce. People scoured mountaintops and gullies for trees.

Both telegraph companies completed the final section of the transcontinental telegraph line in October 1861. Finally, direct communication between the East and the West was possible.

California Chief Justice Stephen J. Field sent one of the first cross-country telegraph messages. It was sent to President Abraham Lincoln. The message assured Lincoln of the West's loyalty to the Union. A consequence of this new invention was that the Pony Express became obsolete.

The transcontinental telegraph made a huge impact on the system of communication. It linked the United States together and laid the groundwork for the communication of the future.

